

Embracing the “Freer Other Thing”: Metaphor is a Portal to  
Imaginative Play and Ludic Learning

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## ABSTRACT

### Embracing the “Freer Other Thing”: Metaphor is a Portal to Imaginative Play and Ludic Learning

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This thesis braids knowledge across different disciplines into an argument for learning and teaching through play, via metaphor and memoir. It examines the memoir of the classically trained pianist Jeremy Denk, *Every Good Boy Does Fine: A Love Story, in Music Lessons*, as both a pedagogical case study and a literary narrative, with particular attention given to the role of metaphor as a tool for ludic learning and communication. My reading shows that it is play, and especially the playful use of deliberate metaphors, that unlocks Denk’s most effective, meaningful performances as both musician and writer. Metaphor, I argue, can act as the cognitive gateway into imaginative play, allowing for learning, creation, and communication, even in a multimodal context. Furthermore, Denk’s use of deliberate metaphor in piano playing and literary writing suggests that metaphor can function as both intra-communication (i.e., within oneself) and inter-communication (between two or more people); this is an extension of Gerard J. Steen’s “new and improved” contemporary theory of metaphor, which proposes adding communication as a third dimension to George Lakoff’s two-dimensional thought-language framework. Then, in the last section of the thesis, I dive into my own act of memoir- and metaphor-driven playful learning. I consider my budding ideas on a ludic literary pedagogy with support from the current scholarship, focusing on three aspects: inclusivity, literary criticism as a ludic practice, and play-based classroom activities (inspired by Denk).

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## **DEDICATION**

To Janet Polk, a bassoonist and teacher extraordinaire.

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## Introduction

Learning how to be a successful classical musician is not unlike learning how to be a successful literary critic. Despite the more obvious differences, both involve a nuanced blend of interpretation, analysis, performance, and above all, communication. For the (professional) critic and musician, the end goal is to express something, to convey original thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Having been an advanced student of both classical bassoon and English literature, I know that the learning experiences are similarly challenging too. (The bassoon is a long, narrow, low-pitched woodwind instrument that is much larger than the clarinet, flute, or oboe with thirteen different thumb keys!) In both the traditional academic environment and the world of classical music, the focus on polished formal performances can intensify pressure and the fear of failure so much that the joy and pleasure of the art are all but forgotten.

However, the right teacher with the right pedagogy can make all the difference, in both disciplines. For four years, I was fortunate to study at the University of New Hampshire under the bassoonist Janet Polk, whose teaching style emphasized student-led discovery and open-ended exploration. Janet had what I now understand to be a play-based, or ludic, pedagogy. These undergraduate music lessons didn't just improve my relationship to the bassoon, they also gave me metaphors that I could apply to learning in my other classes, especially for literary analysis. For instance, if my essay argument was not developing, I would think about the structure of my argument differently, just as I would experiment with various approaches to a tough musical passage. This, I discovered, made the process of interpretation less of a chore and more like an exciting puzzle.

As my studies continued, I often found myself wondering: How might I teach literature with the same magic that I felt learning with Janet? What might a play-based, or ludic, pedagogy

for literary criticism look like? Then, entering perfectly on cue during my graduate studies, I discovered Jeremy Denk's memoir, *Every Good Boy Does Fine: A Love Story, in Music Lessons*. Denk offers a compelling and artistic narrative of his journey from childhood through graduate school training as a classical pianist. His memoir is unique in that it offers real-world pedagogical experiences (especially in the higher education setting) for critical consideration while, at the same time, it is a literary work, an aesthetic object suitable for teaching and performing literary criticism. Moreover, the genre of memoir inherently invites playful learning as readers compare their own experience to that of the narrator. To sum it up colloquially, Denk's memoir provides a literary playground (pun intended) for investigating the possibilities of metaphor as a site of communication, learning, and play, specifically for a ludic literary pedagogy.

In the same way that a musical chord fuses three separate notes into one harmonious sound, this thesis project coalesces three of my identities, those of musician, literary scholar, and student/novice teacher. To use a non-musical metaphor, my interests in music, literary criticism, and teaching are braided here through this study – and this braid invites an interdisciplinary perspective on four main concepts: metaphor, play, pedagogy, and memoir. Extending the braid metaphor, we can consider each of these four concepts as strands in a four-part braid (yes, you can braid with four strands of hair or thread, instead of just three). These four concepts overlap with one another in varying configurations, ultimately uniting into an argument for learning and teaching through play, via metaphor and memoir.

Metaphor plays a key role in Denk's memoir, not just in his own learning journey (which we'll get to later in the thesis), but also as a literary device. His narrative is full of original imagery as he describes growing from a young piano prodigy and gifted academic student (he



graduates high school and enters university at just 16!) to a professional Juilliard-trained classical solo pianist. Unsurprisingly, a lot of his metaphors either involve music or are used to describe it. The separate duties of left and right hands become symbolic of Denk's divided self: "From earliest childhood, you shape yourself around these tendencies [...] One half, the soloistic individual; the other, the accompanying world. One half specific, discrete accomplishment; the other half the common, discreet good" (30). "The thumb," he explains, "is a transit system, helping to lubricate scales, arpeggios, passages of all kinds [...] at once an anchor and a springboard" (47). Slurs create an effect "like hopscotch, where notes seem to leap over each other in search of the next [...] [and] with them, [the theme] dances" (78). Similarly, his experiences as both student and musical performer are equally rich in figurative language. For example, he recounts a sudden change in his lessons with his childhood teacher: "Then, just as we were ascending Mount Olympus, getting to the really good stuff, Bill hit the brakes" (50). Later in university, Denk vividly describes a moment playing in which his "index finger hovered and quivered over the keyboard, like a hummingbird having a panic attack" (175). At another point, when following the suggestion of his grad school piano professor to make one note in a passage last a little bit longer than the others, Denk reflects how "those notes poked out of the stream, like friends waving from a passing train" (227). And when he realizes teachers are not necessarily so different from their students, he finds a celestial metaphor: "I had always assumed that I was the one to be altered, the promising musician to be shaped and formed, the center of the universe, and that my teachers were unchanging influences: stars to be guided by. But it was clear (at that moment) that the stars moved too" (265). Such imaginative metaphors hold significant value throughout Denk's memoir. They are playful, yet they are also accessible, facilitating readers' understanding of experiences they may not share with the author.

Like song lyrics with a deeper meaning, *Every Good Boy Does Fine* reveals a new understanding of metaphor's communicative function, precisely because it takes the form of a memoir. Metaphor has long been a focus for literary and linguistic scholars, but in recent decades, has become a focus for cognitivists, too. This "cognitive turn" in metaphor theory is largely attributed to George Lakoff, whose theory of metaphor, first published in 1989, holds that metaphor is manifest in our language not simply as a linguistic and aesthetic flourish, but as a fundamental organizing feature of human cognition. Lakoff showed that we think in conceptual metaphors and make sense of the world through cross-domain mappings. Under this cognitive framework, metaphor is fundamental to language and thought. This has led scholars to delineate between literary metaphors and metaphors in non-literary contexts, such as in everyday speech and conversation. As a result, the study of metaphor now "raises an issue that is very familiar to literary scholars: the complexity of the relationship between uses of language that are regarded as 'literary' and uses of languages that are regarded as 'non-literary'" (Semino and Steen 243-244). Memoir is uniquely situated to explore this very issue. Unlike other genres, memoir uses literary language, but also frequently recounts real-life non-literary conversations in which other kinds of metaphors appear. In *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, Denk writes with artful metaphors (as evidenced by the small sampling selected above), but also cites the functional metaphors his teachers use during his music lessons, and eventually, his own use of such metaphors when playing piano.

Across non-literary and literary instances, Denk's metaphors are deliberate, thereby allowing for more detailed study regarding this type of metaphor. Gerard J. Steen, professor of language and communication at the University of Amsterdam and founder of the interdisciplinary research center Metaphor Lab Amsterdam, is keen to point out that there has

been virtually no inquiry into metaphor deliberateness within contemporary metaphor research. Steen attributes this shortcoming to Lakoff's two-dimensional thought-language framework. In response, he proposes a "new and improved" contemporary theory of metaphor that adds a third dimension: communication. Metaphor in communication, Steen argues, concerns the contrast between deliberate and non-deliberate metaphor. A metaphor is deliberate when "[people] use a linguistic expression in such a way that they are aware of its foundation in a cross-domain mapping, and in such a way that they may also want to alert their addressee to this fact as well, apparently for specific rhetorical reasons", or as I will propose, for specific artistic or pedagogical reasons (Steen 36). Metaphor in communication is *not* concerned with the difference between metaphor and simile (this instead falls under the linguistic dimension), so this thesis makes no relevant distinction between metaphor and simile; both *A is B* and *A is like B* formulations are considered as metaphor.

The analysis of Denk's memoir as both pedagogical case study and literary narrative to follow will show that it is play, and especially the playful use of deliberate metaphors, that unlocks Denk's most effective, meaningful performances as both musician and writer. Metaphor, I argue, can act as the cognitive gateway into imaginative play, allowing for learning, creation, and communication, even in a multimodal context. Moreover, Denk's use of deliberate metaphor in piano playing and literary writing suggests that metaphor can function as both intra-communication (i.e., within oneself) and inter-communication (between two or more people), which is an extension of Steen's contemporary theory of metaphor. Then, in the last section of the thesis, I dive into my own act of memoir- and metaphor-driven playful learning. Spurred by my (dis)identification when reading Denk's memoir, I consider what my own ludic literary pedagogy might look like as a future educator.

## Play as Pedagogy

Play is a powerful tool for learning: its many well-documented psychological and physiological benefits include enhanced problem-solving, better emotional regulation, higher motivation, and greater imagination (Bateson and Martin). Prominent play scholar Stuart Brown calls it “fertilizer for brain growth” (101). Play, however, is difficult to define, and most play scholars are quick to point out the inherent paradox in even attempting to do so. For Brown, play is better understood by its properties than by a single definition. Play is done voluntarily for fun and without explicit purpose, leads to a diminished sense of self and time, affords improvisational potential, and is something we do not want to end (Brown 17). Brown goes on to note that play can take many different forms, including humor and imaginative exploration (the two most significant forms of play for Denk). The benefits of play do not diminish with age, but unfortunately play is more stigmatized for adults. This may be one reason why play is often absent from high school and university classrooms, even though this denies adult students access to one of the most powerful tools for learning. However, a growing number of educators and scholars are beginning to call for ludic pedagogy in higher education (see Lauricella and Edmunds; Whitton; Leather et al.; Kocher).

This thesis supports that call by analyzing Denk’s memoir as a pedagogical case study that demonstrates the value of ludic pedagogy at *all* ages. Denk learns under numerous teachers with diverse teaching styles between young childhood and early adulthood. My reading focuses on his three most influential piano instructors: Bill (elementary through high school), Joe (undergraduate), and Sebők (Master’s studies). As we will see, Denk’s most effective, meaningful learning and best artistic performances are achieved through play, a pattern that begins in childhood and then is intensified in graduate school when he unlocks the power of

metaphor under a ludic pedagogical framework. Denk *is* the braid at the core of this thesis. Play, pedagogy and metaphor are bound together during his journey in piano, though not necessarily in a linear progression.

It is important to situate Denk as a student of *classical* music. While music is often thought of as a naturally playful activity, this is not generally how it is experienced within the institutions of classical music. In contrast to jazz and more popular styles of music, the classical style emphasizes strict “rules.” Early lessons will focus first and foremost on how to read music, memorizing the different notes, rhythms, articulations, and other standard western musical conventions. Even the mechanics and technique of the instrument are taught and practiced with the goal of being able to better perform what is notated on the page. There is also little opportunity for improvisation within the genre. Occasionally, a soloist might have the freedom to play “out of time” until the rest of the orchestra comes in; or, when playing a solo concerto, there may be a relatively short section that is fully improvised, the unaccompanied cadenza. (I, like many other musicians, have always opted to write out my cadenzas.) Otherwise, we must follow the roadmap of the music, adding expression only through musical phrasing and nuanced variations in note length, attacks and releases, and relative dynamics. Even stylistic interpretation is largely dictated by conductors. This is quite different from the laidback, improv-focused environment of jazz music, where you’ll often hear musicians joking that “there is no wrong note.” In classical music, there most definitely are wrong notes and mistakes (and the fear of making them).<sup>1</sup> The overall atmosphere tends to be serious and focused, with very little freedom to play or experiment. Such is the environment in which Denk studies piano. This is not to say

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Bianco et al. for a neuroimaging study showing how the brain activity of jazz and classical pianists differs, even when playing the same piece of music. Classical pianists prioritize *how* they will play the music, meaning which fingering pattern, articulation, dynamics, etc. to use, whereas jazz pianists instead focus on *what* they have to play, considering which keys on the piano to press and how they might improvise.

that there isn't room for fun in classical music, but Denk (and his teachers) must learn to find and embrace it.

*From Playful Beginnings to Lackluster Learning*

Denk's experiences with Bill, his childhood piano instructor, illustrate the benefits that arise from teaching through play and humor, and the harm in moving away from such strategies as students get older. In one of his earliest lessons, Bill assigns Denk technical, boring thumb exercises for homework, the musical equivalent of tracing letters in a handwriting workbook. Bill then makes a note of the things he'll look for next lesson, ending with a humorous requirement: "(5) signs of boredom and depression" (41). In his memoir, Denk reflects on the effectiveness of Bill's note: "Number five is classic Bill. He'd already figured out that irony was the key to my heart. If I could laugh at my own failings, I might be able to address them" (41).<sup>2</sup> This early experience reveals a central component of ludic learning and pedagogy: playfulness as means to counteract the fear of failure. Educators and pedagogical researchers Mark Leather et al. note that playfulness, which involves "an openness [...] to playing the fool, [to] not worrying about competence," can "[assist] creativity by generating novel combinations of thoughts or actions" (213). When students – both young and old – are open to making mistakes, they are more inclined to explore creative solutions. The teacher and classroom environment play a major role in cultivating this kind of attitude, so it is helpful for educators to embody a playful way of being, or what Leather et al. call a "ludic ontology" (221). While a ludic ontology is quite common in early childhood education, there tends to be shift towards "more serious" learning in

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Denk uses the conventional metaphor, "the key to my heart" when describing irony, which from a rhetorical standpoint, begins to foreshadow the transformative role figurative language (specifically metaphor) will play later on in the narrative. Metaphor will become "the key" to unlocking imaginative play via piano, resulting in greater musical expressivity.

secondary and post-secondary education, which, as Denk's experience will illustrate, often hinders creativity and learning potential.

When Denk enters high school, Bill abandons his earlier ludic ontology, and this negatively impacts Denk: the braid starts to unravel. The loss of "hilarious stars" next to each piece in his lesson notebook (the same notebook with Bill's list above) reinforces the message that learning as an adult leaves no room for play. "*You're an adult*, [Bill] kept saying, *it's time to grow up*" (76). Whereas Bill's ludic teaching style had been effective, "this [new] strategy was met with mixed success." Denk explains how learning the scherzo of the Saint-Saëns concerto, a "piece that craves a childlike bounce," under this new teaching style causes the piece's "wit and charm [to evaporate]" (76). Even though he can perform the piece technically well, Denk wants to experience the piece's "childlike bounce." So when Bill's teaching does not allow for that kind of play, the fun "evaporates." This is the first of several moments in the memoir in which Denk's desire for play(fulness) is a problem for gatekeepers of classical piano.

Denk's learning potential and artistic expressivity are similarly hindered by the pedagogical style of his next teacher, Joe. Early in his undergraduate studies, Denk wrestles with how to approach a "peculiar transition, with a series of repeated notes [that] pulse anxiously" in a Beethoven piece (119). Denk recognizes the emotional complexity in the passage, describing how "these notes are an obvious link to a beautiful theme in the near future, but Beethoven wants us to believe they are uncertain, unstable, haunted—maybe even a dead end" (119). However, he cannot figure out how to evoke Beethoven's "uncertain, unstable, haunted" feel here. Although his previous teacher, Bill, had assigned a repeated note exercise specifically to prepare for a passage like this, Denk laments merely focusing on technique: "this exercise didn't tell you the first thing about how to get Beethoven's spine-tingle. It was like if you asked someone how to

kiss a girl, and they gave you a diagram of the anatomy of the lips” (119). Unfortunately, his new teacher Joe “[doesn’t] like to wander into the technical weeds” and instead leaves Denk with only minimal “diagnostic” feedback: “LH (left hand) too loud [...] Keep in tempo [...] Don’t rush!” (120). It is in this moment that Denk recognizes the misalignment between Joe’s pedagogy and his own imaginative learning style. “Joe was big on the diagnostic What, stingy with the prescriptive How, and mostly avoided the animating Why. He figured I didn’t need much Why. But I craved Why—and I needed a hell of a lot of How” (120). It is not the physical act of playing piano that is most rewarding and important for Denk, but rather the “animating Why”, the purpose and meaning that drives his music making. For Denk, the “animating Why” is all about understanding and communicating the spirit of the piece, be it the “childlike bounce” of the Saint Saëns or the “spine-tingle” of Beethoven. At this stage in his learning, Denk recognizes that his music making is motivated by feeling and meaning rather than merely playing the right notes, rhythms, and musical ornaments. However, neither Bill nor Joe’s pedagogy focus on the music’s “animating Why”, leaving Denk alone to unlock his creative drive.

*(Re)Discovering Play*

Interestingly, it is in an English literature course, Romantic to Modern Poetry, that Denk realizes that accessing his “animating Why” has to involve imaginative, exploratory play. After an instructor criticizes his off-the-mark allegorical reading of a poem, Denk has a revelation:

My allegory wasn’t it. And a paper didn’t have to be a game for a grade, or for David’s [the teacher’s] praise. It had a higher purpose: to search for poetic reality. And what was that? For days, I walked around frigid Oberlin trying to get my head around that question, feeling a puzzle element and a freer other thing, which seemed like a gateway opening between my solitary scholastic side and the wider, more normal and feeling world. (126).



Here, we witness a transformation in Denk's philosophy of art and learning. His focus shifts from extrinsic motivation, "a game for a grade," to what motivates him intrinsically: the "search for poetic reality." Importantly, this search is a type of play, exemplifying Brown's "play personality" of the explorer, who "[searches] for a new feeling or deepening of the familiar, through music, movement, flirtation" or scholarly research (Brown 67). Denk also begins to recognize an inherent interconnection between his art, his scholarly studies, and the greater world: all are linked by what he calls this "freer other thing." This is a fitting description of imaginative, exploratory play, given that one of its defining aspects is its free nature. Through play, the "gateway [opens]" to allow Denk to explore and communicate about "the wider, more normal and feeling world." This new orientation happens first in relation to a literary essay, but this "search for poetic reality" will eventually come to motivate his most meaningful music making. He foreshadows this reorientation by noting that what he learned about essay writing was his "most important music lesson" (126). Through this reflective moment, we come to understand that imaginative, exploratory play lies at the heart of Denk's literary art and his musical art. Moreover, it illustrates a similarity between music and literary analysis, each involving the same playful "search for poetic reality."

Denk finally stumbles through the portal to musical play when he meets Sebők, who later becomes his Master's piano professor. During a master class in Denk's last year of undergrad, Sebők employs a playful teaching technique to great success.<sup>3</sup> He has Denk close his eyes, visualize the keyboard, and "play [a] treacherous passage with [his] eyes still closed" (200). The result of this "mystical procedure" is that "[Denk nails] the passage [and] the sound [is] deeper and richer, even thunderous" (200-201). Sebők has guided Denk into a flow state, a term coined

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<sup>3</sup> A master class is essentially a group lesson for instrumentalists led by a renowned musician, usually a visiting professor from another institution or a professional performer.

by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe an especially focused state of consciousness in which one becomes “so involved in [the] activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi 4). The “mystical” nature of the teaching exercise mirrors Denk’s “mystical” flow state, which is also a play state. Flow states are characterized by the same diminished sense of self and time and improvisational possibility as play, so it is no coincidence that flow often leads to peak creativity, productivity, and performance. Through flow, not only is Denk’s piano playing improved, but it also feels easier, leading him to remark, “a lifetime of difficulty had been replaced with a moment of ease” (201). Scientifically speaking, his cognitive load has been minimized by learning in this exploratory, experimental fashion. According to Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), learning demands “extraneous” cognitive resources based on how the new information is presented or organized; the mental effort required simply to process and memorize the new material and to understand its complexity already requires significant cognitive resources (Hu et al. 1978). When the method of presentation is fun or playful, fewer “extraneous” resources are needed, thereby decreasing overall cognitive load (Sweller; Lauricella and Edmunds 6). As educators Lauricella and Edmunds put it, “not only does fun better *motivate* students to learn, it also improves their *ability* to learn” (6, emphasis in original). Sebők’s quirky and somewhat silly teaching exercise unlocks fun, flow, and effortless learning – and it’s such a powerful experience that it convinces Denk to study with Sebők in graduate school.

Of all Denk’s different teachers, Sebők has the greatest impact, and this is *because* of his ludic pedagogy. While Denk has great respect and gratitude for all his teachers over the years, Sebők holds a place of special significance. This is made clear by his narrative, but also by the fact that he dedicates the whole memoir “To Gyorgy Sebők, who deserves much more than this

book.” When Denk describes his early graduate school years, we see that Sebők’s teaching philosophy is rooted in play, and that it inspires intrinsically motivated, meaningful learning. Sebők believes that “you don’t teach piano playing at lessons; you teach how to practice—the daily rite of discovery where learning really happens” (218). This “daily rite of discovery” is play. After one of their first lessons together, Denk describes an eagerness to “explore hypotheticals” when practicing “a series of repeated C-sharps: played as if giving up on the note, thinking about the note, tired of the note, delighted with the note” (223). In this nuanced exercise, Denk is “giving the smallest detail a backstory” (223). Under Sebők’s ludic teaching, Denk learns to tell stories through music, even at the level of a single note. Learning piano in this way becomes pure fun, as evidenced by Denk, “[wishing] it would never end” (223). This is in sharp contrast, Denk observes, to Joe, who “never talked about games or play” (245). Play (or lack thereof) in Denk’s university piano lessons directly correlates to his level of learning and artistic performance.

### **The Braid Thickens: Metaphor**

Denk’s most transformative learning moment, though, comes when he consciously recognizes metaphor as a tool for music-making. His revelation comes during a rehearsal of Brahms’s First Violin Sonata, in which he suddenly visualizes an entire story for the rondo movement: “And in this piece, I knew and saw and felt it: the main theme (A) was the melancholy gray present, and the episodes (B, C, whatever) were the radiant past. *That was the secret story*. And it was also an unbelievable lesson in how you convert a form, a template, into an expression of the human condition, like a skeleton that comes alive” (233, emphasis mine). Here, Denk has figured out how to create a multimodal metaphor; he combines two phenomena that belong to different categories and are cued in more than one sign system and sensory mode

such that the properties of one, the source, are mapped on to the other, the target, in an *A is B* format (Forceville 469). In this instance, Denk maps the source phenomenon, his visual-verbal story (the radiant past becomes nostalgic present<sup>4</sup>) onto a target phenomenon in a different sensory mode, the music of the rondo. Following the *A is B* format of metaphor, the story *is* the music, and vice versa; through metaphor, he “converts” the template of the music into “an expression of the human condition,” a story. In this way, (multimodal) metaphor allows for music to become storytelling, a type of imaginative play.<sup>5</sup> Denk continues in this vein, explaining to the violinist, “actually [...] each return [is] like a gate crushing shut on happiness,” once again using multimodal metaphor to transform the music into a vivid scene (and in this case, the storytelling actually takes the form of a metaphor itself) (233). When Denk underscores the significance of this moment in his narrative, he explicitly credits Sebők’s teaching for his discovery: “I realized that Sebők had opened this door in me to metaphor. He’d given me permission to use a tool I’d always had” – and ultimately, this “[makes Denk] maybe as happy as [he’d] ever been” (233). Sebők’s ludic pedagogy leads Denk to discover how to *play through piano*, and not just to play piano, so to speak. While it might simply sound like a clever play on words, this distinction is paramount. Music making becomes an act of open-ended, imaginative possibility and not just about the mechanics of piano performance, like technique, rhythm, and musical expression – and this is made possible through metaphor. With figurative language at his disposal, Denk has the means to reliably access the “animating Why” that motivates his playing. He can communicate the feel and spirit of the piece *through* a story. Ultimately, this becomes a

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<sup>4</sup> His story seems partially rooted in the conceptual metaphor ‘feeling is color’ – in this case, ‘melancholy is gray’ – which he then maps onto the domain of the musical main theme.

<sup>5</sup> Not coincidentally, I recall having a similar breakthrough in my own journey as a musician during a group studio class lesson in which we each played through our piece as normal, but then thought of a story in our heads before playing the piece a second time. The change in how the music sounded and felt was surprisingly significant, both as performer and listener. Amazingly, my nervousness and fear vanished, too. Now, I know why – I’d found play through storytelling.

way to explore and convey the “poetic reality” of a piece of music, transforming notes and rhythm into an expression of the human condition.

Metaphor opens the door to imaginative play only when Denk intentionally applies a metaphor to the music. It does not matter whether the metaphor is original to him, only that he chooses to “use [the] metaphor deliberately *as* a metaphor,” specifically for communicative purposes (Steen 36, emphasis in original). Steen’s three-dimensional contemporary theory of metaphor identifies deliberate metaphor as “an overt invitation on the part of the sender for the addressee to step outside the dominant target domain of the discourse and look at it from an alien source domain” (37). For Steen, this invitation concerns the intentional use of a “linguistic expression” as a metaphor “for specific rhetorical reasons,” but metaphors do not exclusively come in the form of a linguistic expression (36). Denk’s case illustrates the use of a non-linguistic, deliberate metaphor employed for artistic, rather than strictly rhetorical, reasons. He metaphorically applies a narrative to the rondo to transform music-making into storytelling, which enhances his musical expressivity to create a more evocative, compelling performance. Storytelling, which Denk accesses via multimodal metaphor, is a form of interpersonal communication. Thus, even though this is not metaphor used in the traditional sense of a linguistic expression, it has the “particular communicative aim of changing an addressee’s perspective” that is characteristic of deliberate metaphor (37). We can discern Denk’s deliberate use of metaphor in this multimodal setting because this is a memoir: Denk gives us direct access to his thoughts and behaviors, as well as his intentions behind them, making it possible to examine the function of deliberate metaphor in this aesthetic though non-literary instance. In particular, Denk’s memoir suggests that deliberate metaphor can function to enhance communication via storytelling.

*Metaphor in Intra-communication vs. Inter-communication*

In this instance of multimodal deliberate metaphor, the “perspective of the addressee” is two-fold: the addressee can be both Denk as musician and the audience listening. Examining this nuanced separation offers deeper insight into the communicative function of metaphor (under Steen’s framework) by providing an opportunity to compare metaphor in intra-communication to metaphor in inter-communication. When Denk applies metaphor to a piece of music, his exact metaphor is not usually made explicit to the listener. (There may be exceptions, such as in the rehearsal context). In fact, in some instances, no one but Denk is listening, and perhaps only in his mind’s ear, as it were. Considered in this context, metaphor is not serving to communicate from deliverer (the one using the metaphor, Denk) to addressee (the one receiving the metaphor, the listener(s)), but directly *within the deliverer*. Here, metaphor is functioning to communicate the “animating Why,” the story, from Denk’s mind to his music. It is communication from his internal world to his external world (via piano) but all within himself; no other person is involved. Denk is the deliverer, but also “the addressee” in Steen’s sense. This is an instance of intra-communication as well as cross-modal communication.

There is also an inter-communicative layer at work and that involves the reception of the music. Musicians like Denk, whose music is driven by poetic expression and imaginative play, use music to tell stories. They want their music to convey plots, characters, settings, thoughts, and feelings to the audience. (I consider myself one of these storytelling musicians.) Even without making their specific metaphor evident to the audience, each listener may in turn develop their own metaphorical interpretation of the music – and this is still metaphor in communication. According to cognitive metaphor theory, we *think* via metaphors, mapping a complex, well-understood source structure onto a less-understood target structure to facilitate

greater comprehension. However, cognitive scientist John Vervaeke and psychologist John M. Kennedy push back against Lakoff's notion that metaphors, especially organizing conceptual metaphors, are implicit, shaping our thinking in a uniform, predictable way. Vervaeke and Kennedy rightfully point out that a single metaphor or metaphorical expression does not necessarily have one fixed mapping to an underlying conceptual or "root" metaphor or meaning, especially since terms or sets of terms can have separate and independent meanings. L. David Ritchie and Valrie Dyhouse, communication professors at Portland State University, offer a poignant example of two differing interpretations of the "same" metaphorical expression: "*tow the line*" vs. "*toe the line*," where variances in spelling suggest separate root meanings (86). Likewise, seemingly related metaphors may also have contradictory meanings, like "*She burns me up*" and "*She lights my fire*" (Vervaeke and Kennedy 274). Metaphors are less straightforward than implicit metaphor theorists like Lakoff, Johnson, and Turner suggest. Even if and when we think in conceptual metaphors, they are not always shared; meaning can and does vary among individuals. Furthermore, Ritchie and Dyhouse point out that "the use of metaphorical expressions may be 'meaningful' in itself, independently of how or even whether the metaphor is actually interpretable" and that communicative purposes can still be achieved even when understandings differ (87). I would argue that music functions as a metaphorical expression in this sense. The music acts as a "meaningful," subjective metaphor for each listener, allowing them to connect with the musician even though they rarely have an opportunity to check whether these interpretations align – and communication does not depend on there being a shared (implicit) metaphor or understanding of a metaphor. From musician to listener, metaphor is working in inter-communication even as it may also be working in intra-communication within the musician. Notably, more passionate playing is likely to elicit greater feeling and

therefore enhanced connection in the listener – and in Denk’s case, his most passionate playing is driven by the imaginative storytelling play made possible by metaphor. Thus, it seems the intra-communicative layer of metaphor can sometimes interact with the intra-communicative layer; the more metaphor works in intra-communication, the more potential for it to work in inter-communication, at least when it comes to Denk’s piano performing (and my bassoon performing, too).

*Play and Communication through Literary Metaphor*

Denk’s use of metaphor in his piano playing is matched by his use of linguistic and literary metaphors in the memoir, which similarly serve to enhance inter- and intra-communication (while also enriching his writing). The recurring metaphors Denk employs to describe melody, harmony, and rhythm are particularly important in this regard. He structures his memoir around these three foundational concepts of music: part one is on Harmony, part two is Melody, and part three is Rhythm. Each part contains three “lessons” on the musical concept in question. Each lesson is a separate chapter, presented alternately with the more conventional narrative chapters of his memoir. Not only is this organizational approach playful, but it also establishes these musical concepts as intertwined with his autobiographical self; they become symbolic of his development as person and musician. Music consists of melody, harmony, and rhythm working together. The melody is the “main tune” of the music, the harmony the chords that complement the melody, and the rhythm is the pattern in which the notes of the melody and harmony are presented, i.e., how short or long each note is played and with how much silence in between them. Denk draws on these concepts to anchor his portrait of self-growth and development.



Denk's specific engagement with these three musical concepts mirrors the conceptual metaphor of life as a journey, in which the question of personal freedom and agency emerges. In *Rhythm, Lesson Two*, Denk describes the rather counterintuitive positionality of harmony, melody, and rhythm for the classical musician. When it comes to melody and harmony (which might seem to be much less rigid in nature than rhythm), there is no freedom: "we [musicians] aren't "allowed" to change the notes in classical music!" (269). However, musicians do have the personal liberty to decide exactly how short or long to play the notes. Thus, despite the constant "negativity and policing" to make sure one plays rhythmically in time (i.e., accurately following the prescribed beats and rests), in the classical setting, rhythm is paradoxically the musical element that allows for the most individuality (269). Denk elucidates this complex relationship among harmony, melody, and rhythm by turning to the familiar trope of the life journey: "Harmonies wander; melodies develop or disintegrate; but only rhythms can truly be free" (269). These spatial and kinetic metaphors are a clever way to express how these somewhat abstract concepts relate to one another within classical music while also creatively structuring his own life journey within the narrative. Harmony represents his childhood and early adolescence, a time when he is unsure of who he is or where he is going, when he is "wandering" and yearning for more as he explores piano, school, and other interests. "At the heart of the art of harmony is desire" (*Harmony, Lesson Two*; 62). Then, during early adulthood, Denk, like melody, which "keeps switching between noun and verb, being and becoming," starts to develop a clearer sense of himself and his desires particularly as he experiences various teaching styles (*Melody, Lesson Two*; 169). It is only after he starts learning under Sebök's ludic pedagogy and discovers how to make piano an act of storytelling play that he can "truly be free." Rhythm becomes the "missing clue that [allows] the story to make sense," (during his initial revelation on metaphor) which later

leads to “an epiphany you can’t fit in the program notes or the preconcert lecture—it feels so fucking good to be alive” (234 and 298). Here, he is talking specifically about the ending of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto, which is discussed in his last lesson on Rhythm, right before the final chapter. In other words, this empowering sense of freedom and joy reflects the culmination of his studies under Sebök’s ludic pedagogy. It is not by coincidence that greater commitment to metaphor and imaginative play lead to his understanding of rhythm, and hence his existential sense of freedom. Rhythm is play; play is freedom. When these three musical concepts are considered as metaphor for his life, rhythm – i.e., the discovery of play – is the key to freedom and joy in life.

The musical concepts as literary metaphors also reveal the dual-layered communicative function of deliberate metaphor, particularly in the memoir genre. Considered in isolation, these metaphors enable a common understanding of harmony, melody, and rhythm between Denk and the reader. However, their co-integration with Denk’s life narrative communicates a richer meaning regarding his personal development. Literature teacher Hildy Miller notes that a common misunderstanding among her students is that “the meaning of a metaphor is limited to a sentence” when in actuality “it is the context that makes meaning clear and enables us to guess at why the author chose a particular metaphor” (11). In *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, these metaphors function in context to communicate narrative meaning from author to reader (inter-communication), which suggests that Denk has carefully selected these metaphors as a part of his literary strategy. At the same time, it is evident that the very process of metaphorically applying the concepts of harmony, melody, and rhythm to his own life has also allowed Denk to make sense of his life experiences. In this respect, his three metaphors serve intra-communication, helping Denk to see previously unrecognized and/or subconscious self-truths, which then

become “communicated” to him on a conscious level as he writes his memoir. This is uniquely possible by virtue of the genre. The act of writing a memoir is often acknowledged as being transformative or healing for the writer. One qualitative research study, conducted by memoirist, author, and psychologist Dr. Diana Raab, compiled comprehensive profiles for five writers, drawing from their memoir excerpts, detailed interviews, lectures, and observations. The results indicated that memoir writing encourages self-reflection, increased self-awareness, insight, mindfulness, and compassion, and in these five case studies, led to a deeper self-understanding (204). Raab’s study focused specifically on memoirs about a transcendent experience in one’s life, but even outside that context, a defining theme of the memoir genre is “making sense of internal experience” (Calder iii). I propose that intra-communicative metaphor is an ideal mechanism for this sense-making process, particularly in memoir.

Beyond their communicative function, the nine lessons on musical form also reveal how Denk uses deliberate metaphor to engage in imaginative play in his literary writing. Harmony, melody, and rhythm are all difficult to describe. Depending on the context, they might be either a relatively concrete thing or more abstract and conceptual. At best, Denk explains, melody is a “sort-of-object” that “you hum [...] to yourself and possess [...] but if you mention harmony to a non-musician, best of luck” (29). So, in order to help his readers understand these concepts, Denk deliberately uses metaphor – and in doing so, his literary writing blossoms into a garden of imagination. Consider this particularly elaborate example in Harmony, Lesson Three, when Denk describes the progression of chords (i.e., the harmony) in Chopin’s Fourth Ballad. He labels the first chord “a sun-kissed Greek isle.” In lieu of musical jargon, he builds upon the ‘chord as Greek isle’ metaphor to construct a detailed story behind the harmonic progression:

You can imagine Chopin, riffling through the glove compartment and unfolding the map, searching the land of harmony one chord at a time, one bit of melody at a time, quadrant by quadrant, accepting that Greek paradise is not his place, that he has to get back to rainy, moldy Paris. And as he changes chords, the old sad waltz sway takes over, without you knowing it. We have returned. (107)

From the single metaphor of the chord as Greek isle, a vivid narrative story unfolds. Through metaphor, Denk flows into a play state, sparking a tale that can then communicate nuanced information about harmony and melody – not just to the reader, but also to himself, particularly when the time comes to interpret them musically on the piano. It is also engaging for the reader of his memoir. Once again, metaphor is supporting intra- and inter-communication, unleashing a cascade of playful stories with both musical and literary effects.

### **Memoir (and Metaphor) for a Ludic Literary Pedagogy**

As I have demonstrated, metaphors do more than help us organize, understand, and make sense of our often-abstract experience: they also lead inevitably into storytelling and imaginative play. This quality makes both metaphor and memoir useful tools in the literature classroom. The literature instructor is expected to teach students not just how to analyze metaphors as rhetoric, but also how to *apply* metaphorical thinking in a broad sense. As Hildy Miller's experience teaching college freshmen reveals, many students fail to realize that metaphor is a way of *conceptualizing* and not just a stylistic device exclusively found in literature; Miller believes that composition and literature teachers must correct this misperception (11). Echoing the same sentiment, literature teacher Elizabeth Crachiolo views metaphorical thinking as a way to get her students to make new connections with a text, "[aiding] them in imaginatively identifying with

what is on the page and transferring it to their own experience” (189). To promote and develop this kind of thinking in her students, she often asks them to find metaphors in Angela Carter’s short stories, individually and then in groups, before they collectively identify common themes across the various metaphors and discuss *why* Carter is presenting this theme(s) in her story. The result is a multiplicity of interpretations, “all valid ways of looking at the story” (Crachiolo 191). Moreover, the analysis and discussion of metaphor then “provides the platform from which the later conversations are launched,” including discussions in which they consider the purpose of new viewpoints in stories like *Wicked* or *Beowulf*, or more broadly, how literature allows readers to identify with experiences beyond their own (191). Though she does not explicitly describe this classroom exercise as play, Crachiolo emphasizes metaphor’s ability to unlock imaginative thinking.

Crachiolo argues that Angela Carter’s short fiction stories are especially well suited for teaching metaphorical thinking. I propose that memoir is equally, if not more, appropriate. Consider the subtle difference between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ instances of metaphor. If the teacher’s goal is to help students see metaphor as more than just a literary device, then they should analyze metaphors in both literary and non-literary settings. In memoir, students can explore literary and everyday conversational applications of metaphorical thinking, which will strengthen their own ability to apply metaphor in both contexts. This is not to discount the value of fiction and other genres, but rather to consider memoir’s unique pedagogical advantages. Since memoir recounts events that have happened in real life, as opposed to realistic events that might occur in fiction, it can invite readers to connect with different kinds of truths through the literary medium. Writer Elizabeth Nunuz acknowledges that while fiction can reveal truths to and about the author, “there are some truths that can best be told in memoir”; she explains that

her literary depictions of incidents of systemic racism “were more compelling when they were based on actual facts” (503). Memoirs may also effectively model the use of metaphor in communicating truths of this kind. Furthermore, incorporating memoir into literary pedagogy diversifies classroom material, which can help combat boredom and apathy throughout the term.

Another value of memoir is that it invites students to make more spontaneous connections (through metaphorical thinking) while still promoting meaningful learning. Instructors tend to prefer teaching the more literary genres of narrative fiction, poetry, and drama. In fact, most resources on teaching literature neglect memoir altogether. Routledge’s third edition of *An Introduction to Literary Studies*, by Mario Klarer, does not include the term “memoir.” Instead “[the book] deals with questions concerning the nature of “literature” and “text” [and] discusses the three main major literary genres [fiction, poetry, and drama], as well as film and its terminology” (Klarer ix). Similarly, Elaine Showalter’s informative guidebook *Teaching Literature* includes chapters on teaching poetry, drama, fiction, and theory, but no chapter on teaching memoir or even nonfiction more broadly. Though it is not a traditional “literary” genre, memoir can inspire stronger personal connections and deeper reflections about our own learning. Memoir lets us learn about ourselves and forge social connections through a kind of imaginative roleplay. Critic Nancy Miller believes that the genre’s popularity and appeal stem from the process of heightened (dis)identification between reader and writer. This effect is particularly intense in contemporary memoirs since we operate under the conviction that the events they represent happen(ed) in our shared world of reality. For Miller, the process of (dis)identification in memoir is not so much a mirroring as a translation or transfer, “the same ‘trans’-fer of relation that inhabits the heart of metaphor and the unconscious; of crossing boundaries” (430). In other words, the act of reading a memoir is itself a process of metaphor-

making – the reader *becomes* the narrative subject through a type of mental play, albeit largely on a subconscious level. Granted, it is true that all reading engages us in the process of (subconscious) fantasizing, where we “[imagine] the inner life of others and [compare] it to [our] own,” blurring the line between pretend and reality (Brown 86). However, in memoir, this fantasizing is not only heightened, as described by Miller, but also allows for increased connection. With memoir, we are not relating to fictionalized or imagined people or places, but real humans and lives, which creates a link even across the differences: “the six degrees of separation that mark the distance from your life to another’s are really, as it turns out, degrees of connection” (N. Miller 433). Degrees of distance in fiction are not always so clearly degrees of connection, particularly when set in non-realistic or fantasy worlds.

From a pedagogical perspective, this enhanced psychological connection has the potential to result in more meaningful learning without necessarily requiring intentional work on the part of the student. Memoirs that speak to the university experience, like *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, promote connection and metaphorical identification among students in a university literature course. Such memoirs are useful for encouraging meta-level thinking about one’s own learning style. This may even be inherently prompted through metaphorical (dis)identification when reading: readers naturally consider themselves in the position of the first-person protagonist, the memoir writer, noting similarities and differences. For instance, *Every Good Boy Does Fine* prompts readers to compare their own educational experiences with Denk’s. In my case, reading Denk’s memoir helped me to see that I too have learned best through imaginative, storytelling play. I therefore suggest teaching university-focused memoirs for the ways in which they encourage reflection on one’s own (ludic) learning. This idea builds upon a similar application by educator Katherine E. Bishop, who advocates for teaching fantasy literature, especially to

EFL students, because of its play-centric depiction of learning. Many pedagogically based fantasy novels (*Harry Potter*, *the Kingkiller Chronicles*, *Earthsea* cycle, etc.) feature academic settings where the protagonists engage in game-based learning and must then transfer their educational skills and knowledge outside the classroom to complete their quest. In this way, Bishop contends that these fantasy novels act as models for students by demonstrating the value of learning through play. Just as Bishop views fantasy novels as models for students to learn about their own learning, a coming-of-age memoir exploring the educational experience, like *Every Good Boy Does Fine*, can function similarly in the classroom.

Reading Denk's memoir catalyzed self-reflection on my student experiences, particularly as I begin my career as an educator: which teaching styles and techniques do I hope to emulate (or avoid) in my pedagogy? I now turn to Denk's novel as a springboard for my own playful learning exercise. Drawing upon Denk's memoir and my educational journey, I explore my budding ideas on a ludic literary pedagogy with support from the current scholarship. While there is a growing body of resources on ludic pedagogy, including in secondary and higher education, a discipline-specific ludic pedagogy of literary criticism remains relatively unexplored, or at least, not explicitly articulated within such a framework. I delve into three aspects of a ludic literary pedagogy: inclusivity, literary criticism as a ludic practice, and play-based classroom activities (inspired by Denk).

#### *Inclusivity in a Ludic Literary Pedagogy*

First and foremost, *Every Good Boy Does Fine* points towards the importance of making my ludic literary pedagogy *inclusive*. Denk's varying educational encounters under different teachers and teaching styles (along with my own) illustrate a common reality within schools and learning institutions: what works for one student may not necessarily work for another. Universal



Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to education that aims to acknowledge this diversity in learning styles by increasing access and removing barriers for *all* learners (“Inclusive Pedagogy”). In both theory and practice, UDL is primarily considered as either an educational intervention or an educational framework, a divide highlighted in the literature review on UDL in postsecondary settings conducted by researchers Beth S. Fornauf and Joy Dangora Erickson. Their review “questions the suitability of framing UDL as an intervention for improving outcomes for certain groups of students” and instead advocates for “UDL as inclusive pedagogy [and] positioning UDL as a process-based framework [allowing institutions] to incorporate variation not only in perceived ability, but in language, race, gender, etc., without assuming the default position of a heteronormative, able-bodied individual as the standard toward which a UDL intervention could remediate students” (191). Whereas the interventionist-approach is inherently limiting, UDL as a framework for educational access and learning is open-ended. This leads me to wonder if and/or how a UDL approach to pedagogy might be seen as a form of play itself (for educators and curricula designers). UDL *is* inclusive pedagogy, but it also aligns naturally with ludic pedagogy.

Despite this natural compatibility, there has been very little discussion within the literature regarding the incorporation of UDL and inclusive education principles into frameworks of ludic pedagogy and ludic teaching. An exception is Nicola Whitton, who, though an advocate of playful learning, worries that there has been little to no recognition that play, especially in higher education, is not equally accessible to everyone: “Play is a privilege for those with the time, inclination, appreciation, confidence, social capital, and ability to engage” (10). The different frameworks of ludic pedagogy all share the same principles— primarily, promoting fun and a playful attitude among learners – but these require an inclusive learning space. Lauricella

and Edmunds offer one of the more detailed and deconstructed models of ludic pedagogy, where fun acts as the primary intrinsic motivator and is supported by and inextricably linked with play (action), playfulness (attitude), and positivity (affect).<sup>6</sup> Leather et al. encourage a ludic ontology (attitude, action, and affect), modeling play and playfulness in practice on a continuum that moves on one axis, from structured to free play, and on a second axis, from leader-directed to player-initiated activities (219). Similarly, Whitton's 'magic circle' of playful learning foregrounds the development of intrinsic motivation (fun), support for learners to immerse themselves in the spirit of play (attitude), and the positive construction of failure (affect). Intrinsic motivation, or fun, can only exist in a space where students feel included, and perhaps even more importantly, where they are able to *access* play in whatever form suits their needs and abilities; without inclusivity, ludic pedagogy runs the risk of reinforcing inequity in the classroom. In other words, ludic pedagogy is not just about the *what* or *how*, but also the philosophical *why*. As Whitton articulates, playful learning is not just a practice, but "a philosophical mindset that incorporates beliefs about 'fair play', social justice and inclusivity" (5) – and this mindset must be shared among students and teacher alike.

If I aim to adopt a ludic literary pedagogy, the classroom contract seems a crucial first step in encouraging this mindset among *all* participants. It helps to create an environment where students feel safe enough to engage in play, even if, as Mia Consalvo has argued, the ordinary rules of life and inherent power dynamics can never fully disappear in (game)play settings. Notably, I can recall only three university courses (one in undergrad, two in graduate school) in which we collectively and intentionally drafted a classroom contract at the beginning of the term

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<sup>6</sup> The descriptors in parentheses are assigned by Lauricella and Edmunds. In the following pedagogy models, I assign the corresponding descriptor(s) to highlight the overlap and commonalities between models across the different terminology.

– and not by coincidence, I remember those classroom spaces feeling especially welcoming as a student (and overall class participation was often greater as compared to my other courses). I found that the classroom contract works to create a space of collaboration while also helping to define shared goals. Hence, when facilitating this activity, I may suggest including a point(s) about play-related aspects in our contract: *in this classroom, we encourage the taking of playful risks and acknowledge that failure can be positive*. Come to think of it, the term ‘classroom’ might not best capture the spirit of play, either. Perhaps ‘play space’ or a similar alternative may be better suited to our collective goals?

### *Literary Criticism as a Ludic Practice*

As mentioned at the outset, my ideas on a ludic literary pedagogy are also informed by personal experiences under my university music teacher, Janet, who largely mirrors Sebók’s teaching style. Both Janet and Sebók foreground open-ended possibility to create a ludic learning environment that feels inclusive and non-limiting. After a few years working with Janet, I realized that it was not just her approach to teaching that was playful, but indeed, her approach to music as an art. This same philosophical mindset could be applied to literary criticism as an art. A ludic literary pedagogy, then, would (re)frame literary criticism as a playful, but still scholarly rigorous, practice. In using the term literary criticism, I refer to the process of cognitively and aesthetically interpreting and evaluating literary works (including written forms like novels, poems, and short stories, but also other forms of narrative, like films and oral storytelling), as well as effectively communicating one’s interpretation and evaluation in written and/or spoken language. In other words, literary criticism involves both critical thinking and critical writing skills, and I must effectively teach both in the literature classroom. Literary criticism as a playful practice remains open to possibility and potential. Inspired by UDL, Rachel Adams has proposed

a functional form of literary criticism that aims to accommodate and make sense of the widest possible range of texts, modes of reading, and interpretive practices. That is, Adams' functional literary criticism is defined in terms of what it *can* do, rather than what it *should* do under the ableist framework of the “highbrow” literary critic.

Building upon Adams, I envision a literary criticism that *can* be fun and play(ful), not just in how it is taught but also in how it is performed. Inherently, literary criticism involves a sort of metaphorical thinking in which we map a critical theory or framework(s) onto a text(s), or vice versa. At an even more basic level, it involves mapping meaning onto an image, phrase, or another aspect of the text. While not necessarily as straightforward as *A is (like) B*, this process still entails thinking in metaphor, at least as represented in cognitive metaphor theory. By extension, then, metaphor can enable imaginative play *through* literary criticism. What I am describing here is not ludic criticism but literary criticism as a ludic practice. For me, cognitive play – coming up with creative interpretations of things and imaginative critical concepts or frameworks – is a large part of the joy of literary criticism, and it is also one of the most scholarly, rigorous parts of the process. Yet literary criticism as a ludic practice is not merely limited to (metaphor-rooted) imaginative play. There are plenty of other ways in which performing literary criticism can become an act of play, particularly if such criticism does not necessarily take the form of a traditional academic essay. Research creation projects are an excellent example, which as the name implies, involve *making* something. Such projects do require critical thinking about the text (and therefore, might involve some imaginative play), but they more directly lead to play through the making or building of a new artistic artifact (like a poem, comedy sketch, blog post, computer game, etc.), especially for those whose play personality is the “artist/creator” (Brown 69). They may also be more engaging, drawing upon a

student's intrinsic motivation, such as when I was able to create a multimedia dialogue between a speaking woman and a "singing" bassoon. (One of my favorite final term projects, I should add.)

Just as Janet constantly encouraged me to "noodle around" and have fun when practicing, my goal as an English teacher is to help students find the play in literary criticism (in whatever form that might take). This approach has long been advocated by bell hooks, who was one of the earliest prominent voices to argue that excitement can and should co-exist with serious intellectual and academic work in higher education (and notably, it was her introductory chapter in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* that first ignited my interest in pedagogy). Excitement and play in the literature classroom does not just involve how one *teaches*, but also how one *performs* literary criticism – and this circles back to embracing the art, be it music or literary criticism, as a ludic practice. The two go hand in hand. Ludic teaching of literature only becomes possible when one acknowledges the ludic potential of literary criticism as a practice. At the same time, educators who approach the teaching of literary criticism in a ludic way are modeling and encouraging the very possibility of literary criticism as play. We witness the latter chain reaction play out in Denk's piano education; Sebök's ludic pedagogy of piano leads piano to become an act of imaginative play for Denk. I underwent nearly the same experience under Janet's ludic bassoon pedagogy. A ludic pedagogy of literary criticism might encourage the same outcome for students of literature.

At its core, my ludic literary pedagogy aims to make the learning of literary analysis fun. This feels especially daunting given that rhetorical analysis and essay writing are often taught in formulaic ways. I remember my high school teaching the "perfect paragraph" structure, where each sentence had to serve a specific function and be placed in a precise order...and this was how *every* paragraph was meant to be written. I hated it. English class suddenly felt like the most

soulless version of a math or science class. Where was the joy and creative possibility? Just as Denk found himself feeling that “music had to be more than a code”, I felt (and still do) that literary analysis is similarly more than a code (255).<sup>7</sup> Such a rigid approach was ineffective for me, and I quickly abandoned it, but it was certainly effective for some of my peers. Conversely, using the “what-how-why” method to craft my thesis was something I used well into my university years. It gave just enough structure to act as a guideline while still allowing for inventive possibilities with my writing. The danger, it would seem, is not necessarily in using these techniques to teach critical writing, but in presenting them as the *only* options or the *best* way to do it (which is not a very inclusive approach, either). In my case, it was only when the technique stifled the creativity and the play that it negatively impacted my learning. Instead, it seems better to adopt the attitude of Sebők, who “always said that each solution was only one solution” (250). Similarly, Janet was always framing my learning of different techniques, fingerings, and breathing mechanics as “adding tools to the toolbox.” As a literature teacher, my approach will be similar: offering multiple strategies and encouraging students to experiment until they find what “tools in the toolbox” work best for them – not just in terms of the best product but also what makes for the most enjoyable process. Like Sebők, who “[alternates] between spirit guide and physics teacher,” as a literature teacher, I must “[try] to bridge the gap between boring technical detail and the mysteries of the universe” when teaching literary criticism (250). One useful starting point might be to collectively draft *The Ten (ish) Commandments of Literary Criticism* with my class, a document outlining the most important principles of critical literary analysis and writing. This would require my students to think about

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<sup>7</sup> Denk’s commentary comes after a 45-minute group seminar class spent debating Mozart’s intended difference between two of his staccato markings, one round, one pointier.

what literary criticism is and how to perform it effectively (including the nitty-gritty details), but hopefully without it feeling tedious and boring.

*Teaching Ideas Inspired by Denk*

In addition to influencing the theoretical foundations of my pedagogy, Denk's memoir has also inspired some direct ludic teaching ideas for my literature classroom, especially concerning movement and metaphor. Denk's doctoral thesis, which he self-proclaims to be a "manifesto about the evils of musical education", argues "that Musical Form should be taught using more verbs and fewer nouns—basically, more creative writing than chemistry" (318). Similar to literary form, musical form is the structure and organization of a musical composition. In the spirit of ludic pedagogy, Denk advocates for teaching musical form through playful invention ("creative writing") instead of memorization and formulas ("chemistry"), much as I hope to do when teaching literary form. Beyond revealing Denk's ludic teaching philosophy, his thesis ignited a spark in my own brainstorming: How might I incorporate more *action verbs*, i.e., more physical movement, into my ludic literary pedagogy?

Movement and play are inherently linked. Movement is the natural companion of play, "[accompanying] all the elements of play [...] even word or image movement in imaginative play," as Brown notes; "Through movement, we *think* in motion" (84, emphasis in original). Something about movement calls forth our human inclination to play (which raises interesting concerns as we move further into the often-stationary digital age). Other scholars have recognized the relationship between movement and ludic learning. For instance, Mela Kocher's playful teaching model PHEW (standing for play, hybrid, easy, and walkabout) "takes movement as its point of departure and explores, elaborates and evaluates subject matter within that movement" (134). To teach literature "using more verbs," a ludic pedagogy of literary criticism

could include similar “walkabout” components, where movement engages active reflection (Kocher 134). Kocher asks participants in a hybrid learning environment to walk outside “together” in Zoom breakout groups and reflect on the conference material in reference to their physical environments (197). The objective is to encourage active reflection by providing a new spatial perspective. A similar strategy proves effective for Denk. While enrolled in a contemporary music ensemble, Denk struggles with how to phrase a particularly abstract solo piano passage. A few days later, when driving off campus and crossing the Connecticut River, his fellow violinist instructs him: “You should play it [the solo passage] like that.” This prompts Denk to reflect on his environment, the river, in relation to the music. As a result, “now [he knows] how to play the passage,” but also has a new metaphor for understanding music. He describes how “Schubert used tuneful flowing brooks to murmur comfort to suicidal lovers; Wagner placed maidens and fateful rings at the bottom of a heroically surging Rhine. But Ives gives you crosscurrents, dirt, haze—the disorder of a zillion particles crawling downstream” (216-217). I might design a similar walkabout activity in my literature classroom by inviting students to walk around the classroom, hallway, or outside to a new location. Then, I would ask everyone to create a metaphor inspired by their new surroundings, a metaphor to describe an important theme in the novel we are discussing, or perhaps for a critical concept, like a thesis statement. My goal would be to playfully inspire an experience like Denk’s, in which a new perspective or understanding of course content emerges through an encounter with the physical environment and metaphor.

Denk’s lesson on musical cross-rhythms cues me to a possible ludic approach to teaching literary meter with humor. During a private lesson with the conductor of the Contemporary Music Ensemble, Larry, Larry asks Denk to feel the complex three-against-four rhythmic pattern



by accenting specific syllables in a rather surprising phrase: “PASS the GOD-damn BUTter” (148). Though at first Denk is “slightly scandalized,” he finds that “it was a delight to yell “goddamn” in a teacher’s room [and] it was so rhythmic, whichever way you accented it.” They “[yell] back and forth for a while, then [move] on to the next logical fraction—5 against 3” (149). It is a humorous and attention-grabbing lesson that creates deeper comprehension: “Rhythm was just bodily math, [Denk realizes]” (149). Denk’s anecdotal experience here corresponds with research on humor that shows how its physiological and psychological effects can benefit learning, producing increased endorphin release, reduced anxiety/stress, and greater self-motivation (Garner 177, citing Berk). In the literature classroom, a humorous approach could be used to teach rhythmic meters in poetry or drama, like iambic pentameter. I might model Larry and ask my students to repeat back a silly and unexpected phrase with proper emphasis on the long syllables (while making sure the language is age-appropriate). Or, in another variation, I could ask students to devise their own outlandish phrases in the proper meter. An exercise like this may also become interdisciplinary, fusing math with poetry. In Larry’s lesson, drawing in other disciplinary knowledge promotes a greater understanding of rhythm, but it also causes Denk’s “inner geek [to] ooh and aah with pleasure” (149). (Denk double majored in music and chemistry.) By incorporating other disciplinary knowledge and approaches within the literature classroom, I might encourage more engaged learning among students with interests in other fields. After all, my present exploration on ludic literary pedagogy has been an act of playful, interdisciplinary learning, helping me to propel my own journey as a literary critic and future educator. I hope to offer the same to my students by using interdisciplinary and other ludic teaching approaches.

## Playful Conclusions

Like the composer of a symphony, my objective for this project has been to orchestrate multiple disciplinary voices into a singular piece, a thesis that encourages an inclusive, ludic style of teaching literature at all ages. I have endeavored to show the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic interplay between metaphor, memoir, pedagogy, and play. Metaphor is a powerful conduit to imagination and storytelling. It is also one of our most effective tools for intra- and inter-communication, in both literary and non-literary contexts. As a music student, the feedback I received most from my teachers, especially Janet, was to “*Just keep playing!*”. My music teachers generally meant this in a literal sense, to keep moving along until the end of the piece even if I made mistakes. Now I interpret this phrase as a metaphor for learning, teaching, and life. So I end by passing it along to my readers and future students: *Just keep playing!*

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